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ABSTRACT

A description is given of an alternative to long-term mentor training. Under this orientation model, mentors are introduced to the mentoring task through a one-day formal training program in which the district makes clear what it expects of mentors, including a review of what has worked well in the past. Prospective mentors are encouraged to feel good about the knowledge and experience they bring to the mentoring enterprise and about the potential value they represent to their proteges. Written materials describing what is expected of mentors and suggesting ways of accomplishing these goals are distributed. It is not recommended that districts require mentors to develop highly structured plans and schedules. Instead, they are asked to study the program's expectations and, working with their proteges, establish a routine of mentor-protege meetings and other activities designed to assist the protege's professional development. (JD)

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Training Mentors and Proteges:

The Key to Successful Mentoring Programs

by

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Training Mentors and Proteges:

The Key to Successful Mentoring

Mentoring in school settings is emerging as one of the most important issues in contemporary American education. This latter-day explosion of interest on the part of school personnel is surprising when one considers that mentoring has been a revered practice for centuries. In fact the concept takes its name from the Greek teacher, Mentor, who guided and protected Odysseus' son Telemachus at the time of the Trojan Wars. Yet in American schools the large scale use of mentoring is just beginning. The slow start of mentoring in our schools contrasts with many governmental agencies and private sector businesses which have used mentoring for many years.

The Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Executive Development Program, for example, established successful mentoring systems more than fifteen years ago. In the private sector dozens of companies both large and small have developed mentoring programs. Bell Laboratories, Hughes Aircraft and Merrill Lynch all report positive results from their use of mentoring. For the most part, American businesses use mentoring programs to assist the professional growth of their junior-level management employees. Their programs normally call for a one-on-one relationship which is voluntary and non-evaluative. That is, an experienced company executive takes responsibility for one new management employee, offering guidance and support. The mentor is rarely the newcomer's immediate supervisor and, therefore, does not make formal progress evaluations (Phillips-Jones, 1983). The roles and responsibilities of mentors in school-based programs, however, are less clearly defined.

Although credible research on school mentoring programs is somewhat sketchy, well conceived school-based programs seem to benefit not only beginning teachers (proteges) but also appear to produce significant staff development and enhancement of self concept among mentors. (See Krupp, 1984; Erikson, 1963; and Schmidt and Wolfe, 1980.) Among the various school-based designs are classical mentoring programs which adopt a one-on-one,

voluntary and non-evaluative approach. Other school-based designs require mentors to conduct formal evaluations of proteges. Such an approach could damage the collegial nature of the mentor-protege relationship. To avoid such damage this paper will argue the need for voluntary, non-evaluative mentoring programs within which both mentors and proteges are provided training.

To be effective, a mentor teacher should serve as a trusted counselor who guides and coaches a new teacher. The mentor should act as a facilitator and supporter for the new teacher, aiding that person's growth within the profession. To avoid jeopardizing the trust between mentor and protege, the mentor should avoid making formal assessments of the protege's professional development.

New teachers report that teaching can be a lonely undertaking. Expectations often are placed on them which are identical to those expected of their more veteran colleagues. Requests for clarification and assistance by new teachers are sometimes interpreted as signs of incompetence. To make matters worse, new teachers believe that they do not receive sufficient emotional support at the school level, and are uncertain where they can go to find it. An effective mentor can reassure the new teacher while providing support, advice and a sense of expanding competence.

New teachers having been associated with an effective mentor strongly support the mentoring process. They state that mentors offer them: constructive criticism and beneficial feedback; guidance and moral support; positive reinforcement; patience and understanding; practical assistance in dealing with management and instructional problems; and assistance in understanding the procedures, rules and expectations of the school.

As in other professions, not all experienced teachers are equally well suited to serve as mentors. Research has identified certain personality traits which appear closely correlated to successful mentoring. Clawson (1979), Alleman (1982) and others specify that experienced faculty with caring, confident, secure, warm and flexible personalities make the best mentors. It is important,

then, to target as mentors those teachers who exhibit these characteristics. But selecting mentors with the ideal personality traits is by no means a guarantee that the mentor-protege relationship will be productive.

Identifying persons well suited to mentoring is only the first step in building a successful mentor-protege program. To the extent possible, mentors should be matched with proteges with compatible teaching styles and philosophies of teaching. Both mentor and protege must agree to be part of the relationship. In fact, mentors and proteges should be permitted to select one another when time and other logistical constraints permit. But whatever selection process is used, mentors and proteges must enter the relationship freely. They also must recognize that the nature of their association will change over time.

As the protege's experience with teaching increases, his reliance on the mentor will lessen. Whatever the degree of protege reliance upon the mentor, a mentor-protege relationship should not continue beyond one academic year. When additional mentoring is required, a new mentor should be identified who can bring new ideas and unused patience to the enterprise. When mentor-protege relationships cease to be productive, they should end. There can be no justification for maintaining this kind of relationship after its productivity has faded.

Once mentors and proteges have been identified, how should they be prepared to perform their respective roles? Regrettably, many mentoring or "teacher buddy" systems do not provide formalized mentor or protege training. In such situations, mentors and proteges are left to their own devices, often with less than favorable results. Research done by Thies-Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1987) indicates that teachers, even those with many years of experience, can be trained to be effective mentors. To prepare these mentors, they created a one-year mentor training program. Operating as a university extension course, this program succeeded in teaching experienced classroom teachers the skills of coaching and instructional supervision. Subsequent study of those trained as

mentors, revealed significant enhancement of self-concept and perceived self-worth (Thies-Sprinthall, 1986). For districts and states which can afford the time and expense of lengthy training, this option appears promising.

When districts or states cannot afford the time and expense of long-term mentor training but, nonetheless, recognize the potential value of mentor training, what alternative is there? Perhaps the most reasonable approach to short-term mentor training is an orientation model which the author developed based on suggestions made by Linda Phillips-Jones (1983). By modifying this approach to meet the specific needs of districts and states, this orientation model can provide beneficial mentor training in a fraction of the time required by the year-long program.

Under the orientation model, mentors are introduced to the mentoring task through a one-day formal training program in which the district makes clear what it expects of mentors, including a review of what has worked well in the past. Prospective mentors should be encouraged to feel good about the knowledge and experience they bring to the mentoring enterprise and about the potential value they represent to their proteges. Written materials describing what is expected of mentors and suggesting ways of accomplishing these goals should be distributed at this time.

It is not recommended that districts require mentors to develop highly structured plans and schedules. In most cases this would be very difficult and time-consuming, possibly promoting resentment. Instead, mentors should be asked to study the program's expectations and, working with their proteges, establish a routine of mentor-protege meetings and other activities designed to assist the protege's professional development. Mentors should be encouraged to offer proteges emotional support, arranging opportunities for proteges to observe effective teaching, explaining the organizational structure of their school and district, and offering knowledgeable advice about dealing with day-to-day problems.

Some districts or states may elect to appoint a coordinator of mentor programs with responsibility for monitoring mentor-protege relationships. If a particular relationship is not working well, the coordinator can intervene to assist in correcting difficulties or making reassignments.

As director of a state-wide teacher certification program which relies upon mentor-protege relationships, the author has provided mentor training to large numbers of experienced classroom teachers. Surveys of proteges in this program indicate that 91% believe that they have benefitted from their voluntary, non-evaluative relationship with a mentor.

If such a high percentage of favorable reaction can be taken as indicative of success, perhaps this orientation model has potential for similar results in other settings. In this program, the training involves one full day of mentor orientation emphasizing the need to accomplish seven cardinal goals for mentor teachers. These goals specify that mentors should . . .

. . . Offer guidance and constructive criticism:
begin with positive comments;
be diplomatically honest, but not always fault finding;
use "I" messages.

. . . Avoid entanglements with official evaluations.

. . . Provide emotional support.

. . . Be patient, understanding and professional:
adopt an informal, but "professional" approach;
arrange opportunities for proteges to observe effective teaching.

. . . Offer practical advice about problems of management and instruction:
remember that this teacher is a novice.

. . . Help the protege understand the organizational and political structure of your school and district.

. . . Be accessible, interested and willing to help.

Just as mentors are trained, proteges should be given guidance in those principles which increase the likelihood of a successful mentor-protege relationship. Adopting a one-day training format, proteges should be encouraged to . . .

. . . embrace with enthusiasm the opportunity to work with an experienced teacher, someone trusted and respected.

. . . welcome the mentor's advice and attempt to implement the mentor's recommendations in classrooms and elsewhere.

. . . ask questions without fear of reproach or recrimination.

. . take the initiative in meeting with the mentor and in observing the mentor and other effective teachers as they teach and perform other duties.

. . . recognize that as "proteges" they are not finished products; being patient and forgiving of their own imperfections.

. . . develop support groups with other new teachers, sharing what they have learned and learning from the experiences of their peers.

Finally, districts and states interested in establishing mentoring programs should do everything possible to reward those who serve as mentors. Administrators should support the program publicly, praising those involved and offering release time or pay increases as incentives. Likewise, schools should coordinate teaching schedules so that mentors and proteges have common planning times or other opportunities to meet during school hours. School officials also

should encourage mentors and proteges to come together for certain extra-curricular activities like participation on athletic teams or in social events (Fagan and Walter, 1982). Such contacts will help build rich and meaningful mentor-protege relations.

As mentoring and other approaches to teacher induction grow in importance, those charged with establishing and supervising such programs will require the benefits of knowledge and experience. The author's experience with mentor-based program in South Carolina points to the value of one-on-one, voluntary, non-evaluative mentoring arrangements and to the importance of providing training for both mentors and proteges.

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Note:

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